

There is a story that appeared a few years ago, in *Guideposts* magazine. It was written by a woman named Cori Connors and in this article, Cori tells the story of her mother, who to this day, is teased for eating peas with a knife, instead of a fork.

But there's a wonderful story behind this strange custom.

Cori's mom grew up during the depression. Her family was poor, like much of the rest of the country, but they had a vegetable garden that kept them from starving. Strangers passing through town in search of work, were always welcome at their table. They never turned anyone away hungry.

One day, her father brought a man home named Henry. Henry didn't know much English, but his gestures of gratitude toward the family were easy to understand. At dinner that evening, the family waited to let Henry start his meal first. Eagerly, he grabbed up his knife and dug into his peas.

The children in the family were astonished because Henry had an amazing ability to balance peas on his knife. But they also began to giggle at this strange eating habit.

So their father, giving his children a silencing look, picked up his own knife and began eating peas.

That day, Cori's mother saw a concrete example of acceptance, of treating a person with dignity, in spite of their differences. And now years later, that message has been passed down to her children and grandchildren.<sup>1</sup>

It was just one simple act of hospitality, making an outsider feel at home, but this father's example made an impression, that lasted more than a lifetime.

Go with me now to our Gospel reading for today. A Pharisee, named Simon invited Jesus over for dinner. As they sat down to eat, a woman heard that Jesus was there and brought an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume.

Keep in mind that a dinner party in those days was a public event. Homes had open courts, and the uninvited would stand around and observe the guests and the festivities. But this woman even crossed that boundary and intruded in a scandalous way. She came and over to Jesus, weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears.

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<sup>1</sup> "On the Cutting Edge," by Cori Connors, *Guideposts*, March 1997, p. 36

And letting down her hair she began to dry his feet, with her hair, and then kissed them and anointed them the expensive ointment.

Now remember, religious leaders such as this Pharisee and Jesus weren't even supposed to touch a woman if at all possible. Doing so would make them ritually unclean.

So when Jesus' host saw what was happening, he thought to himself, "This proves that this man is no prophet, for if God had really sent him, he would know what kind of woman this is."

Then Jesus answered Simon's thought with a parable. He said, "A man loaned money to two people-- \$5,000 to one and \$500 to another. But neither of them could pay him back, so he kindly forgave them both, letting them keep the money! Which do you suppose loved him the most?"

Simon answered, "I suppose the one who owed him the most." "Correct," said Jesus. Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look! See this woman kneeling here!

When I entered your home, you didn't bother to offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You refused me the customary kiss of greeting, but she has kissed my feet again and again from the time I first came in. You neglected the usual courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has covered my feet with rare perfume.

Therefore, her sins—and they are many – are forgiven, for she loved me much; but one who is forgiven little shows little love." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

So what is this story telling us?

First of all it is telling us this truth:  
**the greatest human need, is the need for God's grace and forgiveness.**

This need is especially apparent when we see a world that is so full of cruelty so full of messages that are un-gracious.

Take the example of the British actor, Dudley Moore. As a youngster, Dudley was born with a clubfoot. He was smaller than the other children and one of his legs was shorter than the other. Kids laughed at him and called him Hopalong.

Dudley felt humiliated. “I felt unworthy of anything,” says Dudley, “a little runt with a twisted foot.”

His parents wrongly felt guilty about his disability,  
and so little Dudley felt he had done something wrong.  
His home lacked love, and his parents seemed paralyzed by fear and anxiety.

When he was six or seven, Dudley spent a lot of time in hospitals.  
One night, a nurse named Pat gave him a goodnight kiss.

Forty years later, Dudley wrote, “I almost spin when I think about it.  
She was truly an angel of mercy, and that kiss was probably the first taste of real, unqualified,  
affection I had ever had.

In many ways my entire life is based on recapturing that single moment of affection.”<sup>2</sup>

How did Dudley Moore deal with his need for acceptance?  
He learned to make his classmates laugh. He became the class clown.  
Some people, of course, go to greater extremes to feel accepted.

How many people take their first drink  
or drive their car at dangerous speeds, trying to impress their peers?

How many people get involved in unhealthy relationships  
out of their need to feel accepted or loved?

How many of us have been tempted to compromise our values?

The problem we have a hard time recognizing,  
is that the acceptance this world offers—is always conditional.

**Nothing in this world, can replace God.**

Only God and God’s grace and forgiveness will satisfy our deepest needs.

Which is why the woman in today’s Gospel, came looking for Jesus.  
She knew where to find grace and peace.

Which brings us to the second thing this story teaches us:  
**When the Pharisees witnessed an example of God’s grace  
they had a hard time understanding it and accepting it.**

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald Clark, “Cuddly Dudley, The Wee Wonder,” *Time*, Feb. 21, 1983, p. 70.

In fact, one way to tell if you are seeing God's grace in action is this:

**God's grace will always make the self-righteous grumble...  
and it will always be good news to sinners.**

Our greatest need is for God's grace and forgiveness,  
but sometimes we are like Simon the Pharisee.  
When we have a hard time understanding or accepting God's grace  
it prevents us from extending that grace to others.

Until you and I am utterly blown away by the fact that God has forgiven us  
it's going to make it impossible for us to forgive others.

When we don't **get** God's Grace, we have a hard time understanding how God can so freely  
forgive others.

If I'm being self-righteous I'm going to be quick to judge others.  
I'm not going offer hospitality to a stranger  
and I'm certainly not going to care about whether my neighbor knows Jesus or not.

A few years ago I heard Bishop Margaret Pane from New England give the keynote at the  
Southeastern Iowa Synod Assembly.

Her husband raises Black Angus cattle and has a lumber mill.

But one morning he was away from the farm,  
and she was in the middle of preparing a sermon, when suddenly  
a neighbor stopped by and reported that the cattle had gotten out.

She told us, "He's always away...when those cattle get out."

So she and a neighbor did their best to direct the cattle into a fenced in area.  
The trouble was...it was not a good place for the cattle.  
You see, it didn't have access to water, and in one corner of that field was a patch of Mountain  
Laurel. And if the cattle started eating it, it could literally kill them.

But it was the best they could do, until her husband got home.

So she went back to the house, and sat down, and tried to get back to writing her sermon.  
But her mind kept wandering back to the cattle, and worrying about whether they were alright.

No matter how hard she tried to concentrate, she couldn't stop worrying about the cattle.  
and then a light went on in her head.

And she said this: “Here I was fretting more about some cattle who were not safely pastured, than I was about people who are not safely pastured  
...people who don’t know Jesus’ grace.

So let me ask you this morning:

“when is the last time you fretted about the people of RSM who are not safely pastured?

Is your next door neighbor safely pastured? Are they safely in God’s care?

Are your family members or your close friends safely pastured?

Do they drink from the living water of God’s grace?

Or do you pray for their salvation?

On this Sunday, when we gather to bless and break the bread,  
it’s easy to think of ourselves like Simon.

Like Simon, we have gathered to invite Jesus to dinner.

But that’s not quite right.

We call this the Lord’s table, the Lord’s supper.

He is the guest who becomes the host.

We have been invited and gathered by the one pours out His grace for us.

This morning, may the grace of God touch your heart,  
and then let it pour into the lives of those around you. Amen